Work After Lockdown

Working from Home under COVID-19 lockdown:

Transitions and Tensions

January 2021

University of Southampton
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About *Work After Lockdown*

Work After Lockdown is a major research project funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research & Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19. Our research examines how enforced working from home in the UK is changing how people want to work in the future and how organisations respond.

An innovative research partnership

Work After Lockdown is an innovative research partnership of academic and applied researchers from the university, commercial, and social sectors specialising in human resource management, and organisational behaviour. The project is led by the Department of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at Southampton Business School (University of Southampton), in collaboration with the Institute for Employment Studies and work design specialists, Half the Sky.

Work After Lockdown is a major research project funded by the Economic & Social Research Council investigating how working from home under Covid-19 lockdown will impact how the UK will work in the future

About this report

The project has completed the first wave of its research, relating to the period of rapid change during the lockdown of March-July 2020. This report presents insights from this first wave of data collection and summarises the learnings and implications for employers and policy-makers.

The themes explored in the report relate to managing change; employee health, well-being, performance and productivity; working effectively from home; learning and development; and future demand for hybrid and flexible working.

The analysis draws upon three sources of data collected between July and December 2020:

- analysis of the national dataset Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey;
- 1,035 survey responses to our online worker well-being survey among employees working from home in jobs that were more office-based prior to the pandemic;
- 38 in-depth interviews with leaders, managers, and colleagues without management responsibilities in four case study organisations, selected to cover a range of geographical working experiences across the UK, as well as different organisational forms. Verbatim quotes from interviews are used throughout the report.

The Work After Lockdown research continues throughout 2021. Future insight reports and webinars will report on the national worker well-being survey and case study interviews in July and December 2021

Focus sectors

Our focus is on the working from home transition, experience, and outcomes in two industry sectors: Professional, Scientific & Technical (PST) and Public Administration & Defence (PAD), together representing 1 in 7 of all UK jobs, which we examine at individual and organisational levels.

These sectors are interesting because PST has a much higher percentage of white-collar, desk-based occupations relative to the rest of the UK economy, and PAD has a high proportion of key worker roles in the workforce for whom exclusive working-from-home is not an option.

Our case study organisations are two local authorities operating in England and Wales, and two large law firms with offices across the UK. In focusing on these sectors and types of organisation our findings have wider application to all jobs that were formerly office-based, and to organisations managing both mono and hybrid working patterns across a workforce.

A longitudinal approach

Work After Lockdown explores the experience, impact and outcomes of pandemic-driven working from home at both individual and organisational levels. The project employs survey and interview methods along with analysis of national datasets over an 18-month period (July 2020 – December 2021). See Appendix A for methodology.

The lasting impacts of pandemic-driven working from home can only be discovered with time. The *Work After Lockdown* project will repeat the worker well-being online survey of employees in our two focus sectors, and will continue to follow the experiences and adaptations of four case study organisations throughout 2021.

Future insight reports and webinars on second and final waves of data collection are scheduled for July 2021 and December 2021.

Two local authorities in England and Wales, and two large professional services firms in the legal sector with offices across the UK are participating in *Work After Lockdown* as case study organisations.

Lessons from Lockdown One

As people and organisations across the UK navigate a third period of national lockdown in January 2021, our research offers three main learnings from the first, with an intention to steer employers towards priority actions that will support employees and enhance performance.

Well-being matters

Productivity under lockdown is good. Nine in ten (88.4%) employees feeling they had got at least as much, if not more, work done at home as in the office. Maintaining this during the pandemic takes its toll, with employees' responses on mental health and well-being ranking low – at 47 out of 100 - measured against the World Health Organisation WHO-5 global standard.

Key determinants of better mental health are working to contracted hours, satisfaction with work/life balance and frequent contact with line manager. These were not universally achieved. Parents, carers and managers put in more hours, struggled with collapsed home/work boundaries, and felt under pressure. Poor workforce health and well-being threatens business continuity. Reliance on individuals 'coping' is not a sustainable strategy to maintain productivity. Well-being - physical, mental and emotional health - should be prioritised for organisational stability and performance.

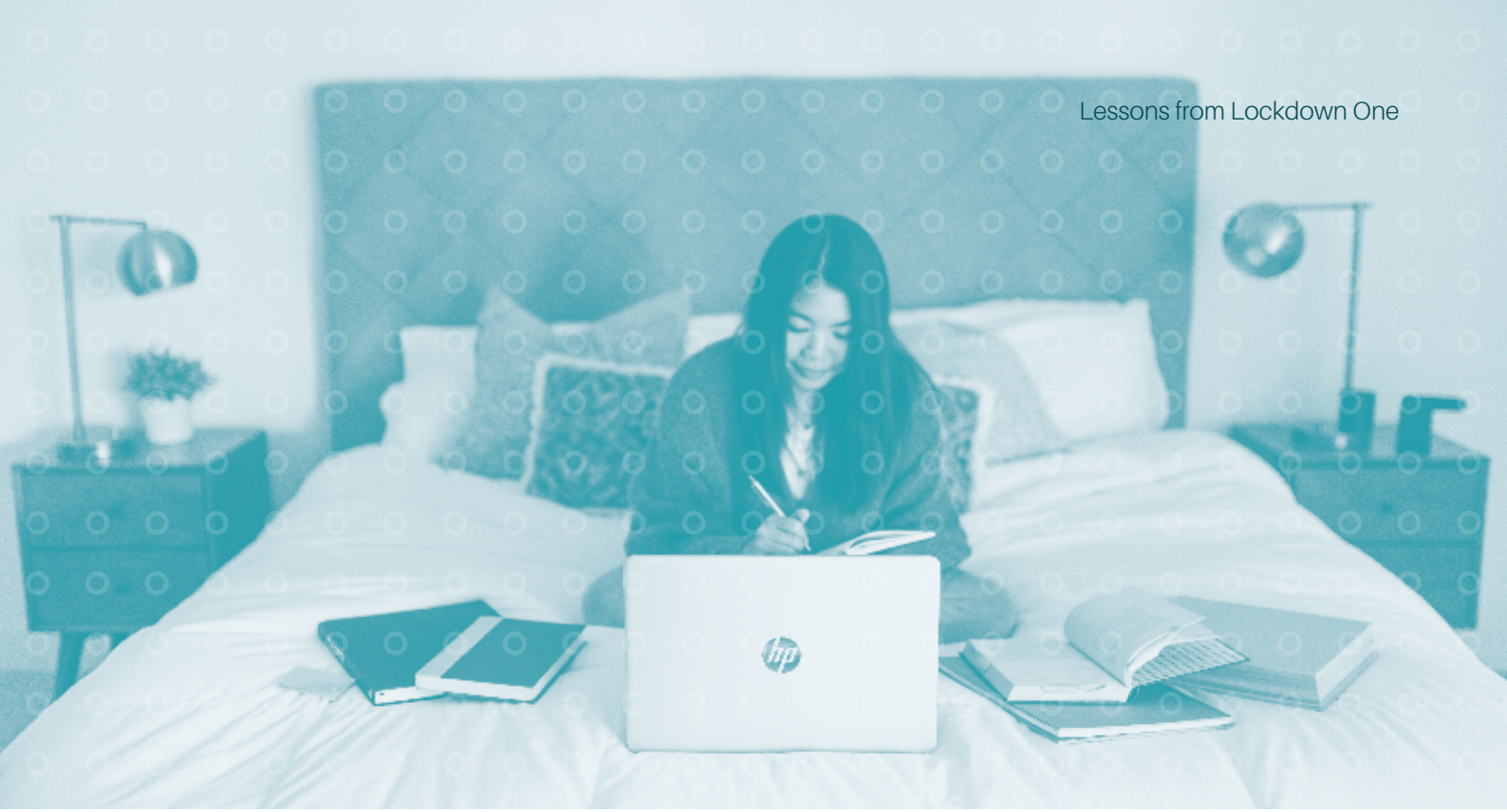
Workers have proved they are highly adaptable in these unusual times. Employer focus is now needed on well-being to support people and sustain performance.

Social deficit and hybrid working

Many people expressed a strong need for connection and social support. Few miss the regular travel to work. Many miss the workplace as a source of social interaction – those opportunities to contribute new ideas, learn from others and feel connected to the organisation. Digital communication has not been an adequate substitute for these interactions that enrich working life. No organisational effort to help employees compensate for this social deficit is likely to be wasted.

Missed social contact could partly lie behind the clear preference expressed by the majority to combine office with working from home in the future. Seven in ten (73%) employees wished to adopt a hybrid work arrangement - blending working from home with the communality of the office - and to retain the flexibility and control over their working pattern from which they have benefited under lockdown.

Strong workforce demand for hybrid working requires employers to re-engage with flexible working and consider how to design jobs and workspaces for the future.



Pivotal role of the line manager

There is a key role to be played by line managers in not just sustaining employees during lockdown but also helping them flourish. Only a minority of line managers have received any guidance on how to co-ordinate the different working patterns necessitated by lockdown or how to manage geographically-dispersed teams.

Many embraced the challenges of the rapid move into the first lockdown. They made immense efforts supporting their colleagues practically and emotionally. This was often invisible, yet time-consuming, work and no adjustments were made to their workload.

On the downside, working from home has exposed managers who lack empathy, have limited interpersonal skills, or are not suited to the complex demands of people management. Organisational stability and future growth will be assisted by reviewing managers' suitability for the task, and by developing training curricula that strengthen the new people management competencies the future shape of work demands.

Employers must look after their line managers. Developing training that strengthens the new people management skills this shape of work demands is vital for resilience, continuity and growth.

Recommendations for employers

1. Focus on well-being interventions and practical adjustments to workloads and working practices that remove burdens, ease intensity, and promote work-life balance
2. Re-engage with flexible working for the existing workforce, and review the implications for recruitment policy and practice
3. Define what a hybrid working pattern looks like in every job role and develop approaches to managing hybrid working in practice
4. Develop standards for good line management. Emphasise the social and interpersonal skills needed to support, motivate and engage people through changing circumstances
5. Provide training that strengthens the management skills and capabilities that a future of hybrid and flexible working demands

Working from Home under lockdown

Our analysis of national survey data sourced from the Understanding Society Covid-19 Study[1] presents the overall working from home picture before and during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Using the latest available data spanning April to September 2020 we show that exclusive working from home was relatively rare among employees prior to the pandemic, with 2.7% of employees always working from home in January/February 2020.

The picture changed dramatically after the March lockdown.

The proportion of employees that always worked from home reached levels of around 30% during April-June 2020, gradually declining to 21% in September 2020.

Working from home increased significantly in the two industries of interest, reaching levels of 58% and 55% in Professional, Scientific & Technical (PST) and Public Administration & Defence (PAD), respectively, in June 2020, proportions that are almost double those observed across the labour market during the same month (29%).

Less than 3% of UK employees worked exclusively from home prior to the pandemic, rising to over 30% in March and April 2020

[1] University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020. [data collection]. 6th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-6

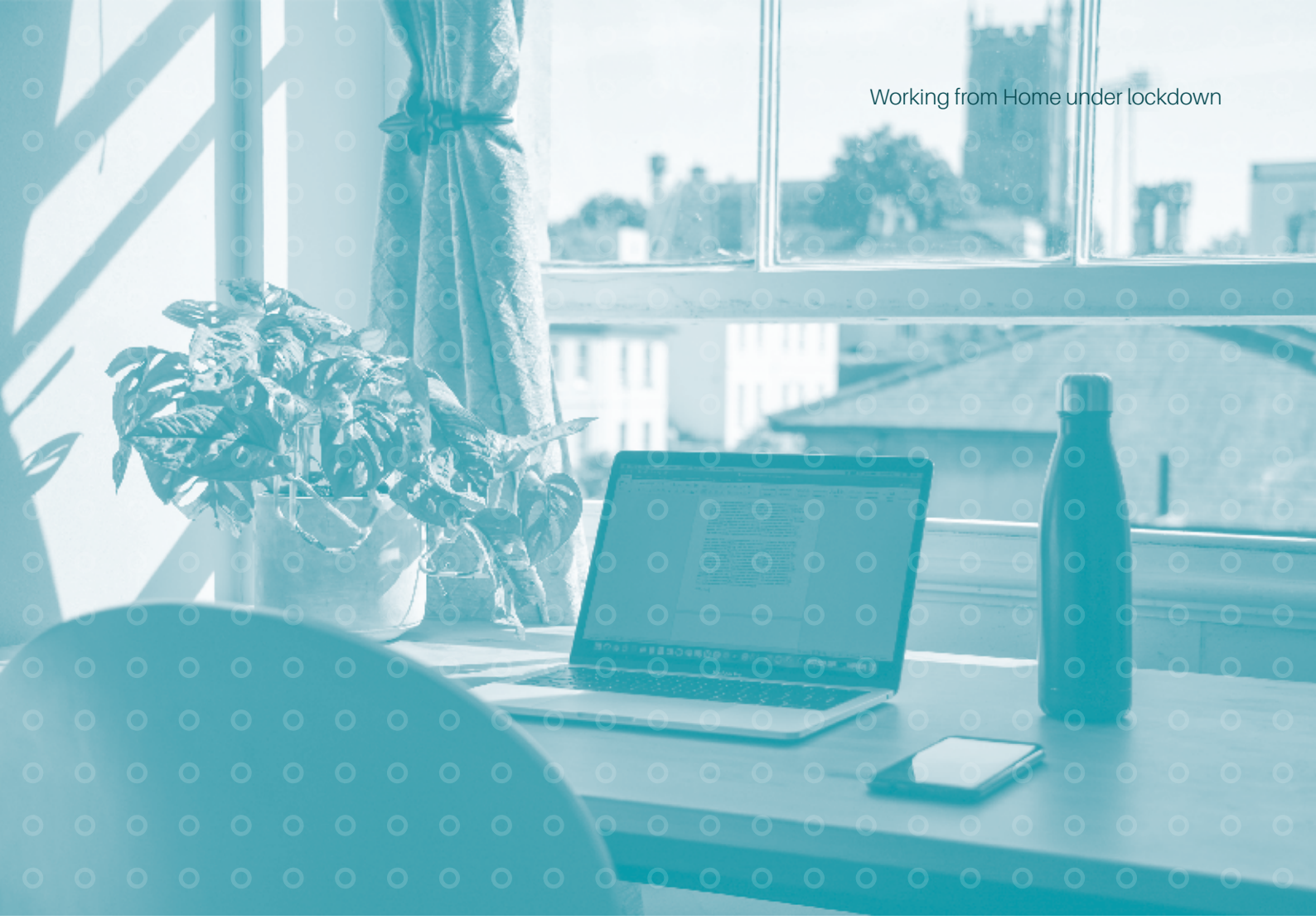


Figure 1 – Proportions of employees that always work from home by sector

	All industries	Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (PST)	Public Administration and Defence (PAD)
Before lockdown*	2.7%	3.9%	1.4%
April 2020	31.5%	—	—
May 2020	31.5%	—	—
June 2020	28.9%	57.7%	54.8%
July 2020	26%	47.9%	50.2%
September 2020	21%	—	—

*January / February 2020. **Source:** Understanding Society Covid-19 Study, waves 1-5, and authors' calculations. **Sample sizes are:** for Jan/Feb 2020, 5,193, 312, and 254 for all industries, PST, and PAD, respectively; for April 2020, 6,630; for May 2020, 5,754; for June 2020, 5,369, 389, and 264; for July 2020, 5,196, 378, and 301; and for September 2020, 4,809. **Notes:** — data not available. A full demographic profile of the working from home population is included in Appendix B.

Transitioning to Working from Home

Here we explore the experience and practicalities of transitioning from office to home as the exclusive place of work under unprecedented and imposed circumstances. We use extracts from our interviews with leaders, managers, and employees, and our well-being survey data to illustrate our analysis.

Places, spaces and technology

Organisations were at different stages of technological readiness when they were forced into mass working from home. Those who had invested in laptops and virtual collaboration tools experienced fewer immediate practical obstacles to productivity.

Others had to accelerate the distribution of hardware and the rollout of operating systems and security updates to ensure that people were able to do their jobs easily.

The unusual circumstances of lockdown meant people were often working at home for the first time, and adapting without warning. They might be sharing their home-based workspace with others, and so had little privacy, or had to be peripatetic, negotiating their use of space around household members' relative need for quiet.

Workspace could be more of an issue for young people living in shared accommodation and bedsits, often working in their bedrooms or in communal rooms. Managers observed that this could then link to deteriorations in well-being:

"just looking, in a little studio, at the same four walls every day for several months, I think that did take a toll."

Complaints that Wi-Fi capacity was unreliable peaked among parents now coping with the demands of two generations using it for work and online learning. At the same time, it was noted that people losing their connection during meetings had become a normal part of one's working day, *"everybody does accept that."*

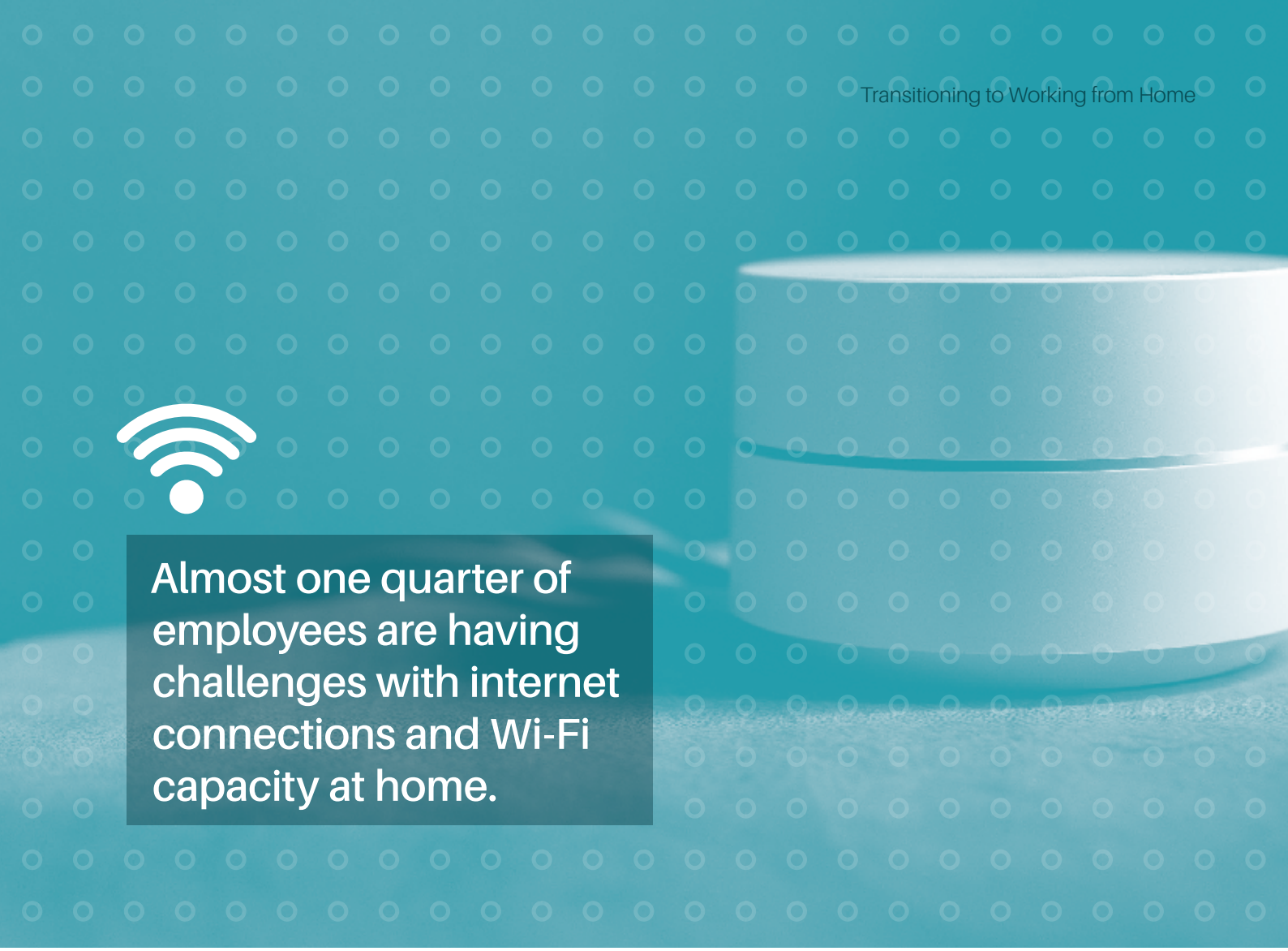
There was variability too around how well organisations could support people in creating a productive workspace. If employers offered budgets to purchase office chairs or made arrangements for staff to take home equipment, it was appreciated.

Lockdown forced employees to adapt their daily working practices. For example, they were unable to print out documents, had to adapt to using single screens, and had more limited IT support.

For a local authority, the environmental implications of restricted printing resources were significant:

"we've been forced into a paperless system which we've been trying to get for years and years and years."

By contrast, another interviewee reflected that lawyers found reviewing hard copy documents was more effective in picking up errors.



Almost one quarter of employees are having challenges with internet connections and Wi-Fi capacity at home.

A leader explained that home workspaces now needed to be adequate to support all jobs in their entirety, rather than just occasional working from home:

"there's very much a difference from working from home versus homeworking. And I know it's semantics, but ... that was the transition part."

While virtual meetings were invaluable in adapting to full-time working from home, they quickly became overused by organisations, a phenomenon that for some disrupted effective working:

"everyone has talked about Zoom fatigue ... being on video all the time is more intense."

This commonly-shared reaction to being endlessly on camera after the initial novelty should encourage organisations to consider using virtual communications more strategically in the future.

Workspace could be more of an issue for young people living in shared accommodation and bedsits, often working in their bedrooms or in communal rooms

Communication and team cohesion

Communication was an issue, especially early on when people were adjusting to a new working environment and learning new tools for virtual collaboration such as Teams and Zoom.

But this was less about manager-employee communication, and more about team relationships; as people were *"missing the water cooler moments and the various unplanned interactions."*

Informal interactions were hard to replicate using digital tools but some organisations facilitated virtual socials as a nod to the importance of staff remaining connected outside of job roles.

One leader in a law firm reflected that much of organisational information-gathering was based upon proximity:

"If I am trying to do something and I think, 'Oh God, I must ask X,' I must just pop into their office … I would pop in and I would ask them a question and it takes about two minutes. Well, if I was working at home and I thought, 'Oh, I have to call them,' I have to try and track them down, I have to have a long conversation about how their day is going, and then get to the point! … it all just takes much longer."

Also important were the support networks that staff forged to maintain morale and motivation in a high-stress environment, such as social services staff who worked with clients in traumatic circumstances, and who developed an informal debriefing process to cope with some aspects of the role.

On the other hand there was a new sense of *"working together"* under lockdown, where managers were more in tune with staff's needs, in part because of their shared investment in getting through a time of crisis. There was a real sense of *"everybody taking care of one another,"* and that extraordinary times necessitated a different way of working.

New methods of communication also offered colleagues a glimpse into others' lives not previously visible. This was felt to have had an empathetic and humanising effect:

"it's strange actually, in some ways I feel as if I have a deeper connection with some of my colleagues now."

Staff reported how teams had become more tolerant and more flexible around each others' challenges,

"if you were somebody who was locked down with young kids and you couldn't make a call, you couldn't make a call! … or kids came in during calls, or you were interrupted … it humanised everybody."

Experiencing lockdown working became a learning opportunity for organisations to consider more communication options than before:

"that kind of willingness to take risks, to understand that we can work effectively when we are not in the same room. And to really be more thoughtful about the way that we work and how we interact with each other."

[2] Aldridge F, Jones E and Southgate D (2020) Learning through Lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, London: Learning and Work Institute

Learning under lockdown

New ways had to be developed to replicate the 'on the job' learning that had previously happened by observing problem-solving, negotiations and decision-making. This was particularly important for new joiners or trainees.

Prior to lockdown, part of a trainee lawyer's learning experience was the daily ad hoc, as well as more structured conversation with their peers and mentors, which is vital to develop professional knowledge:

"We have recognised that and now say to the client that [trainee] is going to be listening in on this call, for their development, and then after it I will spend a few minutes with the trainee reflecting on what happened and why."

Those who started jobs during the lockdown, were in the unenviable position of having to build team and line management relationships entirely remotely. They missed out on an in-person organisational induction. It is difficult to quantify what they have missed out on through not being in the workplace or the complications of having to decode workplace culture remotely.

Our survey revealed that self-investment in training, learning and skill development was low. 33% of employees said they had engaged in extra training or learning during lockdown to enhance their skills. This compares to a national figure of 43% who had taken part in some form of lockdown learning, rising to 54% of those full-time workers not furloughed[2]. Employers are going to need their workforce to be agile and ready to learn new skills as working practices change and restrictions are eased.

This is an area that employers may want to focus on and increase their investment in content and innovative modes of delivery to suit new work patterns.

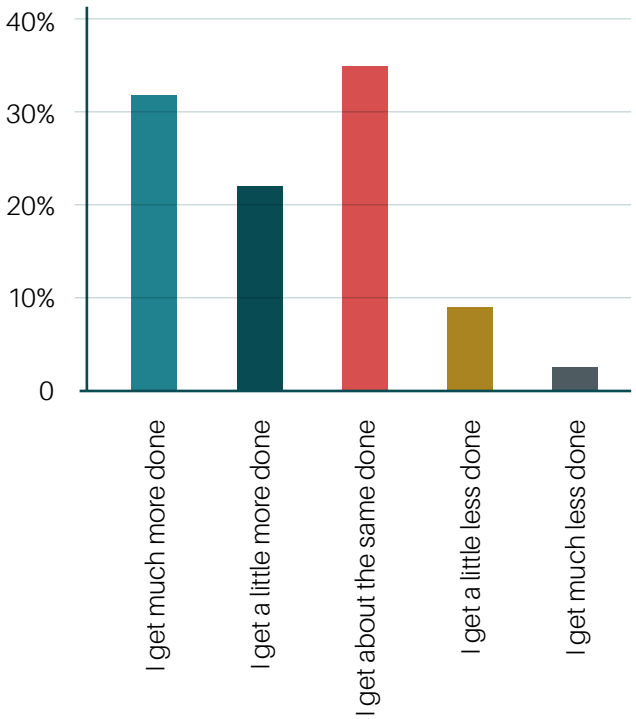
Almost 9 in 10 people report getting at least as much, if not more work done, at home

Being productive from home

There are less data available on the effect working from home during lockdown has on labour productivity. It should also be noted that there is no objective measure of productivity for use in surveys, and most UK employers do not routinely collect data on output per hour worked. So, for our survey, we asked workers to tell us whether or not they felt their own productivity had changed since before lockdown, measured by work done per hour worked.

By this self-reported measure of productivity we found that almost nine in ten workers (88.4%) said that they had got more done or as much done as in the office pre-lockdown, and just over one in ten felt they were doing less.

Figure 2 - Self-reported productivity Working from Home



We found that four factors aid productive working from home. People with the highest self-reported productivity, were also working from home under conditions that enabled them to:

- Re-order the tasks in their jobs
- Concentrate on one activity for a long time if needed
- Control their thoughts from distracting from the task at hand
- Return to focus on a task after interruption

As extraordinary as the circumstances of lockdown were, and despite the stresses of coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear there were personal gains through working from home.

Interviewees commonly spoke of their relief at not commuting, and of the financial savings achieved. However, the time gained was of more value.

"I previously lost three hours to my commute, and so I feel, being completely honest with you... I am dreading going back into the office for that... it puts a huge strain on you as a family."

Employees were liberated from dashing between commitments in different locations. They had more autonomy over their time to craft their own jobs and to spend more quality time with families. Organisations too benefited, as more employee time was invested in jobs, even if this was on a more flexible schedule. These gains translate across to the productivity scores reported.

Despite the time benefits and productivity gains experienced by most people, sustaining exclusive working from home for weeks and months under lockdown had its challenges. Worker well-being emerged as a significant issue in our survey and an area where employers need to act.

Health and well-being under lockdown

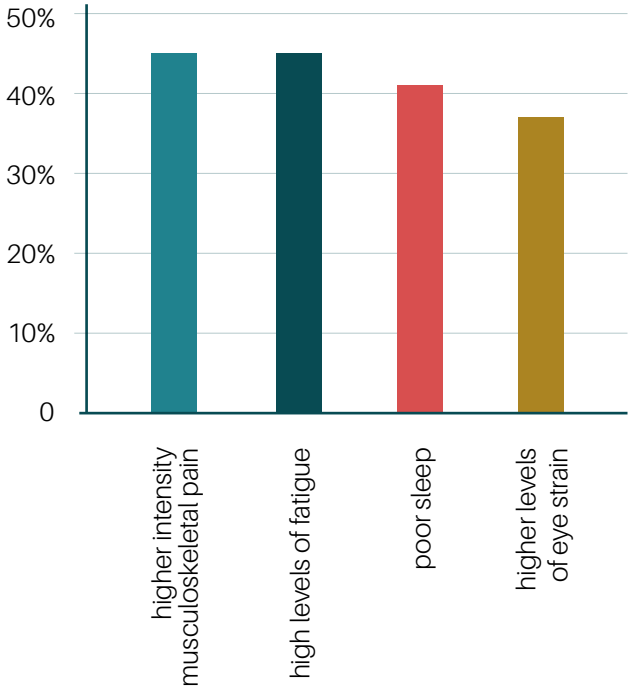
Amongst the employers we spoke to there was a strong awareness of the need to connect with and monitor workforce well-being issues at the organisational level. Pulse surveys were used frequently during the first lockdown. These enabled employers to identify where more support was needed.

Many respondents reported experiencing worse symptoms of musculoskeletal pain, higher levels of fatigue, poor sleep, and higher levels of eye strain in the two weeks prior to our survey than previously.

Only 40% of respondents said that their employer had conducted a health and safety assessment while they had been working from home.

Using the World Health Organisation – Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5) to measure well-being, on average, respondents scored 47 out of 100 which is, in comparison to previous UK and Europe-wide surveys, relatively low. For example, a previous IES survey of UK workers under lockdown registered a score of 51.6 on this measure[3]. A survey of over 20,000 EU workers by the European Foundation in Dublin found that the WHO-5 measure in April 2020 was 49 and by July it had risen to 53[4].

Figure 3 - Employee health symptoms in lockdown



[3] Bajorek Z, Mason B and Bevan S (2020), Wellbeing under lockdown: Results of a survey of British homeworkers, Occupational Health at Work, 17(2):29–34.

[4] Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Mental and emotional health

Focusing on mental health, it was clear there were differences between people and circumstances that contributed to experiencing better or worse mental health while working from home.

Key determinants of better mental health using the WHO-5 measure are:

- fewer physical health symptoms
- working to contracted hours
- more frequent contact with their manager
- higher levels of satisfaction with work-life balance
- those self-identifying as extroverts

Finding that extrovert personality types had coped better than introverts seems counter-intuitive, but echo the results of other comparable international studies[5]. The lower mental well-being scores for introverts may be because of the demands upon them to communicate frequently and 'perform' intensively via video while working from home under the first lockdown.

Working from home offered positives in terms of enabling some people with long-term health conditions to remain in work which would have been impossible in an office (an example was given of a recent amputee). Concerns were raised by managers that employees with mental health conditions were vulnerable under lockdown and required sympathetic management and signposting towards resources. This could be more problematic on a virtual basis, and managers were concerned that such difficulties may not be disclosed nor be obvious.

"it's the people who aren't making a lot of noise who are struggling the most."

Managers learnt to watch for flags that someone might not be coping, such as always having their camera switched off on video calls, or not engaging in meetings, and made efforts to make contact with them beyond team meetings.

Well-being concerns intersected with personal circumstances, such as isolation, or the struggles of looking after young children during working hours, with line managers playing a role in both understanding individuals' challenges and reaching out to staff.

Isolation and social deficit

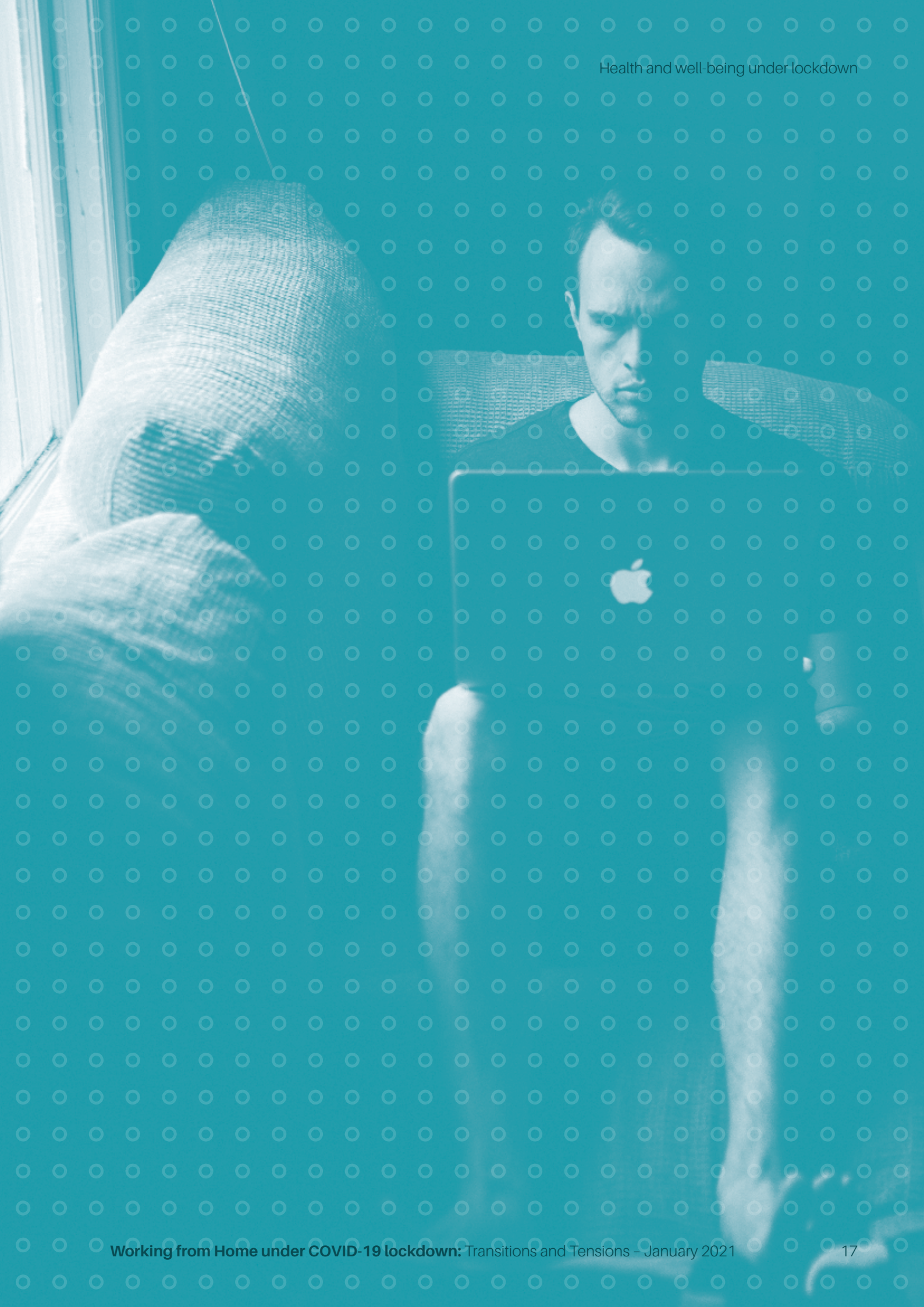
There is a strong need expressed by our respondents for connection and social support. Although most people are happy not to have to commute so regularly, feelings of isolation or disconnection from what is going on in the workplace, missing opportunities to be creative, to contribute new ideas, and lack of informal interactions with colleagues were widely cited.

Nor was a sense of isolation confined to those living alone. Younger people living in flatshares in areas where they had few personal connections, found working from home was a very different experience compared to when they had been regularly going into a workplace:

"it makes you even more aware of how lonely you are in a big city."

Managers also felt that those staff who were more isolated were keener to be more office-based once it was safe to return.

[5] Wijngaards I, Sisouw de Zilwa SCM and Burger MJ (2020) Extraversion Moderates the Relationship Between the Stringency of COVID-19 Protective Measures and Depressive Symptoms. Frontiers in Psychology. 11:568907.doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.568907



Balancing working from home with domestic responsibilities has been the greatest challenge of lockdown

Parents and carers under pressure

Balancing working from home with domestic responsibilities has been the greatest challenge of lockdown, as many employees have lost their usual support structures.

Those with very young children, those with special needs, or who were caring for shielding family members, were faced with the twin challenges of performing their job while supervising children or relatives who needed high levels of input.

Those with older children had to provide support with online learning, as well as supporting the emotional needs that inevitably arose in such testing times. Parents sometimes spoke of their anxiety and guilt in managing these competing pressures.

Parents more than any other group, talked about needing to work in the evenings and at weekends to stay on top of their workloads. The 'role conflict' that many experience as a result of the tension between their roles as carers and workers echoes one of the main drivers of stress in the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) stress management standards. This is difficult and potentially harmful to sustain, and with clear well-being implications[6].

There was some recognition among managers that female employees were significantly affected by their caring responsibilities and it was understood that the situation was even more challenging for lone parents, *"for sure, there were people who just found it impossible."*

Most managers and colleagues understood the impossibility of maintaining standardised working hours in these circumstances. They talked about the importance of being alert to staff becoming exhausted, and maintaining open dialogue around workload and working patterns.

Conversely, there was evidence that a smaller proportion of managers were less sympathetic to diverse needs, invoking workforce 'fairness' in justification. These managers hinted that complicated working patterns were not sustainable in organisations. Correspondingly, a small proportion of employees complained that little accommodation was made for the difficulties they faced in reconciling competing demands on their time.

One manager raised these issues with senior management and emphasised the importance of organisational responses being developed in addition to line managers' support. Without such advocacy, individual coping would become entrenched and normalised, and workforce well-being compromised:

"A lot of them are very much kind of, 'Well if no one tells me there's a problem, then it's all fine.' And I genuinely don't think they mean to bury their heads in the sand, but they genuinely don't think about it because they assume that people are like them, and therefore they would shout if there is an issue."

Leading by example was felt to be important, as was messaging that organisations appreciated their staff's extraordinary efforts, allied with encouraging good practice, such as taking breaks and annual leave.

[6] Bevan S (2020), Work without boundaries: Wellbeing in Covid-19 lockdown, The Work-Life Balance Bulletin, British Psychological Society, 4 (1) Summer 2020, pp5-9.

Future preferences for work after lockdown

We asked employees about how they would like to work after lockdown. Overall, employees seek greater flexibility and discretion to choose where and when they work, within the needs of the organisations' goals. A clear majority seek to work from home all or some of the time in the future.

Figure 4 - Preference for working from home after lockdown

	I would prefer to work at home all of the time	I would prefer to work at home some of the time, or to perform specific work tasks at home
Strongly agree	19.1%	23.7%
Agree	16.7%	49.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.1%	14%
Disagree	26.8%	7.9%
Strongly disagree	17.2%	4.8%

Our survey findings mirror national data from the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, where 75% of employees across a broad range of industries want *some* working from home once things return to normal; 13% would prefer working from home all the time, and 12% do not want to work from home at all.

The strong support expressed at this point in time for hybrid working (which we define as choosing to work in different spaces in a typical week), and for discretion and flexibility to adjust the place and timing of work, suggests an appetite among employees for innovation in job and workspace design.

Jobs, once considered as office-only are now successfully performed at home and few employers foresee a return to entirely office-based working.

"I don't ever envisage a time where I've got a team of office workers five days a week or myself sat in an office five days a week, I think it will be a bit of a hybrid model ... there will be times when you will need to go into the office."

We intend to run our survey again in mid 2021 and ask the same people the same questions about their preferences for working from home in the future. This will measure the persistence of this preference for hybrid and flexible working, which may adjust through time and successive cycles of lockdown restrictions.

73% of employees would prefer to work from home some of the time, or to perform specific work tasks

Figure 5 – Proportions of employees that always work from home by sector and various characteristics (June/July 2020)

	All industries	Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (PST)	Public Administration and Defence (PAD)
Gender			
Male	27.8%	49.4%	51.2%
Female	27.1%	57.4%	53.3%
Age			
16-34	27.0%	46.6%	60.7%
35-54	28.7%	59.3%	46.0%
55+	25.7%	42.7%	55.7%
Household composition			
No partner, no children	23.8%	45.7%	57.5%
No partner, with children	16.9%	—	—
With partner, no children	29.7%	50.3%	57.7%
With partner, with children	30.6%	60.1%	45.6%
Ethnicity			
White British	27.1%	53.7%	53.8%
Other	31.9%	45.2%	37.0%
Immigration status			
UK-born	27.7%	53.8%	52.3%
Non UK-born	27.5%	41.1%	51.8%
Health			
Health condition	28.2%	56.8%	60.0%
No health condition	27.0%	50.3%	46.5%

Source: Understanding Society Covid-19 Study, waves 3 & 4, and authors' calculations.
Notes: — too few observations.

Working from Home under COVID-19 lockdown:
Transitions and Tensions – January 2021

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